

Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland:

# Public awareness of the system for complaints against the police in Northern Ireland, 2010.

June 2010

# Contents

	Page
• Executive summary	3
• Introduction	6
• Methodology	7
• Survey findings	
Perceptions of police misconduct	8
Making complaints against the police	10
Awareness of the Police Ombudsman	12
Impartiality of investigation	17
Fairness and equality of treatment of complainant and police officers	18
Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing	19
• Appendix 1: Survey questions	22

# Executive Summary

## Perceptions of police misconduct

Eighty four per cent of survey respondents had never experienced unacceptable behaviour from a police officer; 11% said that they had experienced it once or twice and five per cent said that they had experienced it more frequently. The most frequently reported type of unacceptable behaviour was that a police officer had been disrespectful or impolite.

## Making complaints against the police

Fifteen per cent of those respondents who had experienced unacceptable behaviour said that they had complained about the incident. The most frequent reasons given by those who had not complained were firstly that the incident would not be taken seriously and secondly a belief that nothing would be done about their complaint.

Forty two per cent of respondents said that they would go first of all to a police station in order to make a complaint against the police, 17% said that they would go to the Police Ombudsman and 16% said that they would go to a solicitor.

A larger proportion of Protestants than of Catholics said that they would go to a police station, while Catholics were more likely than Protestants to say that they would go to a solicitor. Similar levels of Protestant respondents (15%) to Catholic respondents (18%) said that they would go to the Police Ombudsman.

## Awareness of the Police Ombudsman

Eighty eight per cent of respondents said that they had heard of the Police Ombudsman. Protestants were more likely to be aware of the Ombudsman than Catholics. Respondents aged under 25 showed lower levels of awareness of the Police Ombudsman than older age groups.

The source of information about the Police Ombudsman most frequently cited by respondents was television (86%). Sixty per cent of respondents stated they would prefer to use face-to-face contact to make a complaint, whilst a further 28% would prefer to complain via letter or telephone.

The majority (80%) of those respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman thought that he was independent of the police. Seventeen per cent of respondents thought that the Police Ombudsman was part of the police.

## Impartiality of investigation

Eighty three per cent of respondents were confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints in an impartial way, whilst 13% were not confident that investigations were impartial. There is little difference in the proportion of Catholics and Protestants who cite that they are confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially; confidence amongst Protestants has risen from 51% in 2002.

## Fairness and equality of treatment of complainants and police officers

Eighty six per cent of respondents thought that they would be fairly treated if they were to make a complaint against a police officer to the Police Ombudsman. Similar proportions of Catholics and Protestants were likely to think they would be treated fairly.

Nine out of ten respondents (90%) felt that a police officer being complained about would be treated fairly. Catholics and Protestants responded similarly when asked about the treatment of police officers, with 92% of Catholic respondents thinking that police officers would be treated fairly compared to 89% of Protestant respondents.

Those respondents who thought that either the complainant or the police officer would not be treated fairly were then asked who they thought was treated better; the complainant or the police officer? Twenty four per cent of these thought the complainant was treated better, while 68% thought the police officer was treated better.

## Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing

Eighty seven per cent of respondents felt that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police in Northern Ireland do a good job. The proportion of Protestant respondents who believed that the Police Ombudsman will help ensure that the police do a good job has steadily increased since February 2002 to reach a similar level as Catholic respondents in January 2006. During the period 2007-2009 the level of confidence was lower among Protestant respondents than among Catholic respondents. This year, there are similar proportions of Catholics and Protestants who have confidence that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police in Northern Ireland do a good job.

The main reasons given by respondents were:

- the police would treat the communities in Northern Ireland more impartially;
- the police would give less cause for complaints from the public; and
- the police would investigate crime better.

## Statistical significance

Statistical significance tests have been carried out on the findings and differences are reported where they have been found to be statistically significant at the 5% ( $p < 0.05$ ) level of probability (two tailed). This means that for any observed result that is found to be statistically significant one can be 95% confident that this has not happened by chance.

# Introduction

The Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland was established by the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 to provide an independent system for investigating complaints against the police in Northern Ireland.

The Police Ombudsman's Office is committed to carrying out research and consultation in order to improve the quality and effectiveness of the police complaints system. It is also committed to both informing the public about the Police Ombudsman's powers of independent investigation and gaining the confidence of both the public and the police in the police complaints system and processes. As part of a programme of research, the Office carried out its first survey of public awareness of the police complaints system in October 2000. This was followed by surveys in March 2001, March 2002, February 2003, January 2004, March 2005, January 2006, January 2007, January 2008, January 2009 and January 2010.

This report presents the findings from the eleventh survey, which was carried out in January 2010. The data was collected through a module in the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency's (NISRA) Omnibus Survey.

The research provides information on:

- experiences of police misconduct;
- awareness and independence of the Police Ombudsman;
- perceptions of the impartiality of investigation of complaints by the Police Ombudsman;
- perceptions of fairness and equality of treatment of the public and police by the Police Ombudsman; and
- perceptions of improvements in policing due to the existence of the Police Ombudsman's Office.

# Methodology

Sixteen questions were commissioned by the Police Ombudsman's Office for inclusion in the January 2010 NISRA Omnibus Survey.

The survey sample was drawn from the Valuation and Lands Agency list of addresses. This list was stratified into three regions (Belfast, East Northern Ireland and West Northern Ireland), and a random sample was drawn from each stratum. Interviewers called at each address on the list and randomly selected one person aged 16 or over living at the address for interview.

The total sample size was 2,200 addresses. The fieldwork took place between 2 January and 6 February 2010. Interviews were achieved with 1,216 individuals, representing a response rate of 62 % of the *eligible* sample.

Weighting factors were applied to the data in relation to household size.

The percentages given in the tables have been rounded to the nearest whole number. The following symbols have been used:

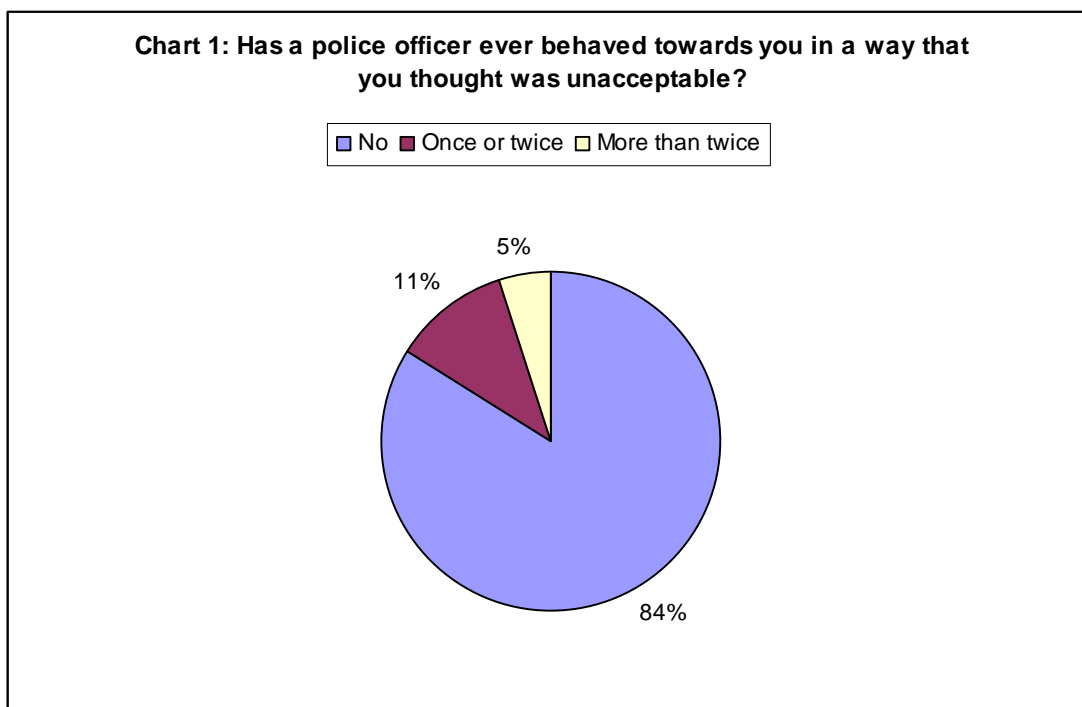
- 0%: figure in cell is less than 0.5%
- : cell is empty.

In certain cases percentages may not add to 100% due to the effect of rounding.

# Survey findings

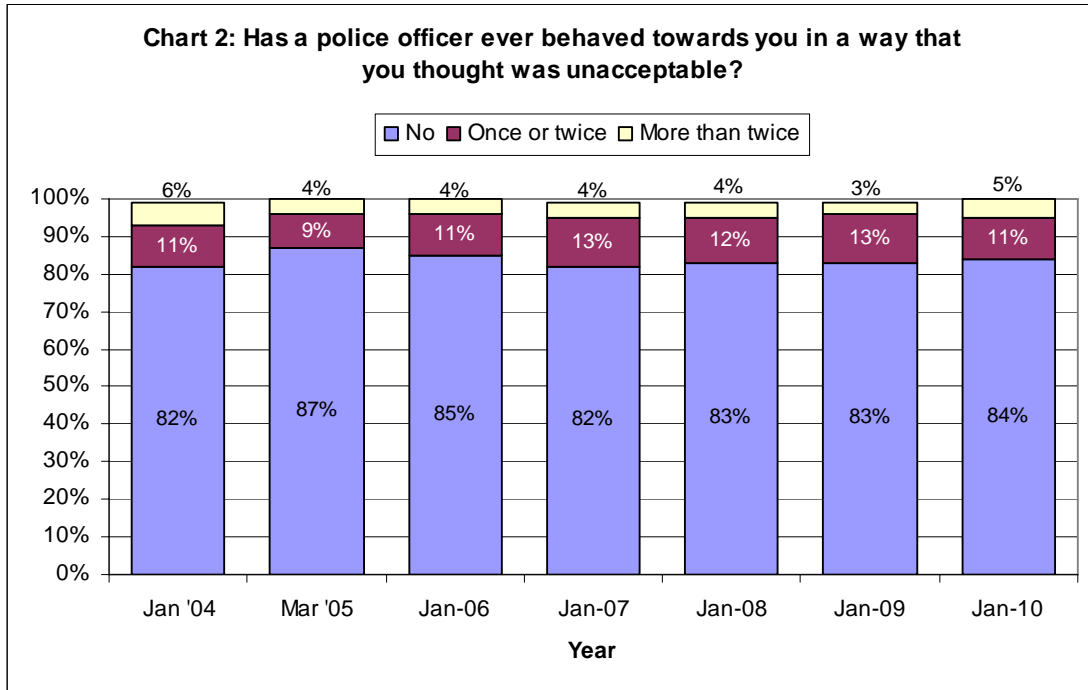
## Perceptions of police misconduct

When asked “has a police officer ever behaved towards you in a way that you thought was unacceptable?” the majority of respondents (84%) said no, 11% said they had been treated unacceptably once or twice, and five per cent had been treated unacceptably on more than two occasions (Chart 1).



Proportions of respondents who have experienced unacceptable behaviour from a police officer has remained steady over time, except in 2005 when a smaller proportion of respondents stated that they had experienced unacceptable behaviour at least once.

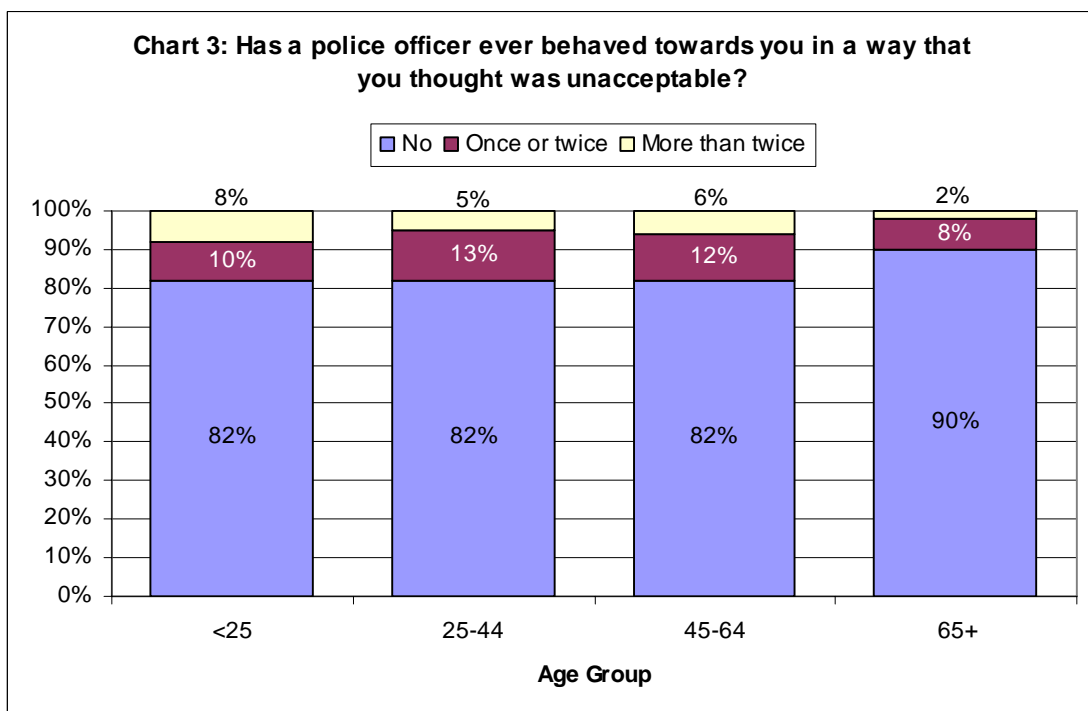




A greater proportion of Catholics (20%) than Protestants (14%) had experienced unacceptable behaviour.

There was a marked difference in the experiences of men and women, with 22% of men stating that they had been treated unacceptably on at least one occasion, compared to 11% of women.

Respondents aged over 65 were less likely than respondents in other age groups to say that they had experienced unacceptable treatment (Chart 3).



Those respondents who stated that they had been treated unacceptably by a police officer were asked to elaborate further; to describe the way in which the officer had behaved; whether or not they had complained about the incident; and, if they hadn't complained, why they hadn't.

When asked what the officer did that they felt was unacceptable, the most common response was that the officer was disrespectful or impolite to the respondent (54%).

Table 1 shows a full breakdown of the types of unacceptable behaviour reported by respondents.

**Table 1: Types of unacceptable behaviour**

<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>% Respondents</b>
Officer was disrespectful or impolite	54
Officer did not carry out their duty properly	24
Harassment	20
Officer didn't follow proper procedures	19
Wrongly accused of behaviour	16
Officer was violent	14
Stopped or searched without reason	14
Discrimination by race, gender, age or religion	9
Officer swore	8
Officer used sectarian, racist or sexist language	6
Officer took an item of respondent's property	3
Searched house without reason	2
Other	3

(Note: Percentages add to more than 100% as respondents could give more than one response)

## Making complaints against the police

Of those respondents who had stated that they were treated in an unacceptable manner, 15% said that they had made a complaint about the incident.

Respondents who did not complain about their experience were asked why they didn't make a complaint. The main reason quoted was a belief that it would not be taken seriously (30%), followed by a belief that nothing would be done about their complaint (29%). Four per cent of respondents said that they didn't make a complaint because they didn't know how (Table 2).

**Table 2: Main reason why incident not complained about**

<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>% respondents</b>
Felt it would not be taken seriously	30
Felt nothing would be done about the complaint	29
Incident was not serious enough	15
Could not be bothered complaining	7
Scared of police reprisals	6
Didn't know how to complain	4
Didn't want to make trouble for the police	3
Other	6

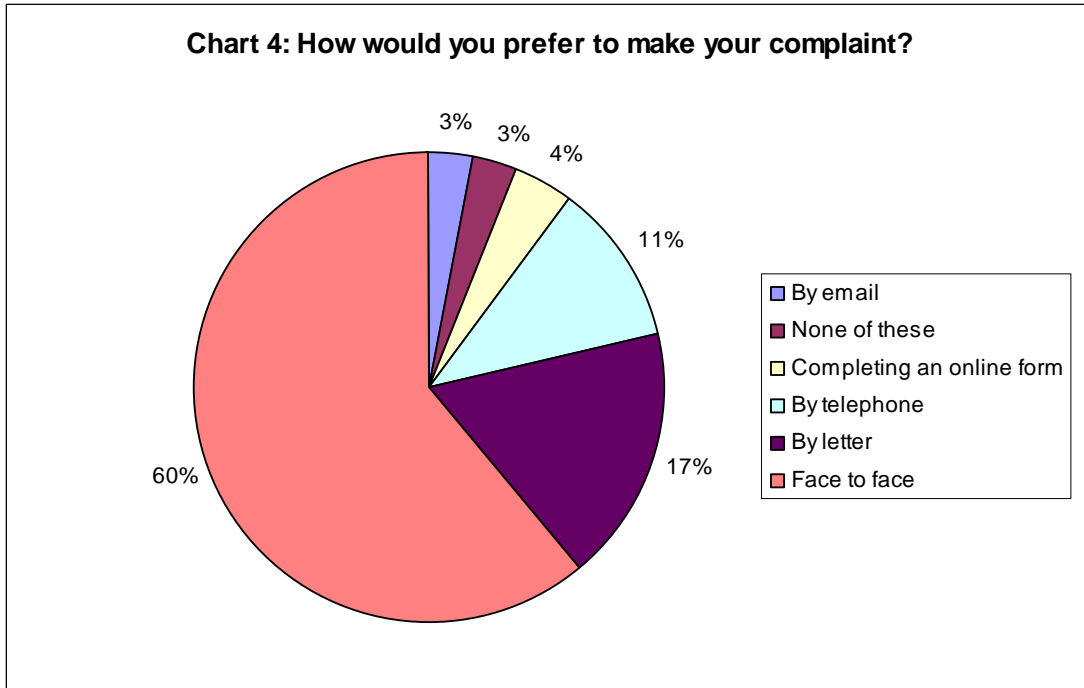
All respondents were asked where they would go initially to make a complaint against the police. Table 3 shows that respondents were most likely to make their complaint at their local police station (42%). Seventeen per cent of respondents would take their complaint directly to the Police Ombudsman. This proportion has increased since 2009 (14%).

**Table 3: Where respondents would go initially to complain**

<b>Where respondents would go to complain</b>	<b>% respondents</b>
Local police station	42
Police Ombudsman	17
Solicitor	16
The Citizens Advice Bureau	6
An MP/MLA	6
A local politician, e.g. a councillor	5
Wouldn't make a complaint	4
Chief Constable of the PSNI	1
Other	1
Don't know	1
Policing Board	0

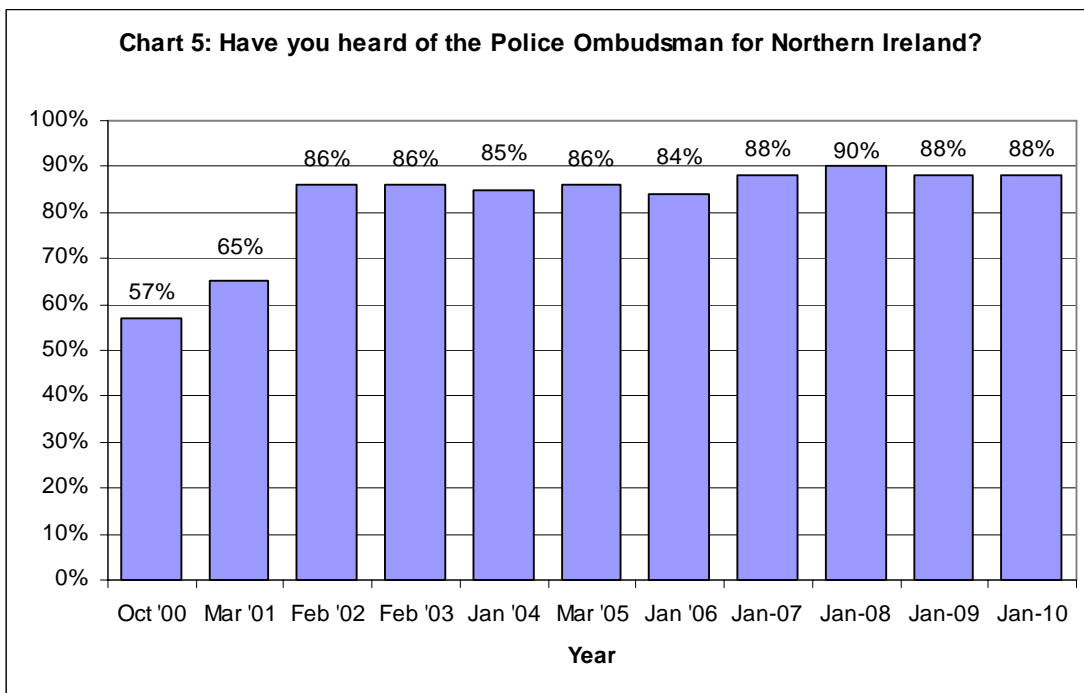
Protestants were more likely than Catholics to say that they would make their complaint at their local police station (48% compared to 34%). Similar proportions of Catholic and Protestant respondents were likely to say they would go to the Police Ombudsman to make their complaint (18% of Protestants compared to 15% of Catholics). Catholic respondents (24%) were more likely than Protestants (11%) to say that they would make their complaint to a solicitor.

An additional question was added to the survey this year to gauge how respondents would prefer to make complaints against the police. As illustrated in Chart 4, the majority of respondents (60%) stated that they would prefer a face-to-face method of making complaints, whilst a further 28% would prefer to use a letter or telephone to make complaints against the police.



## Awareness of the Police Ombudsman

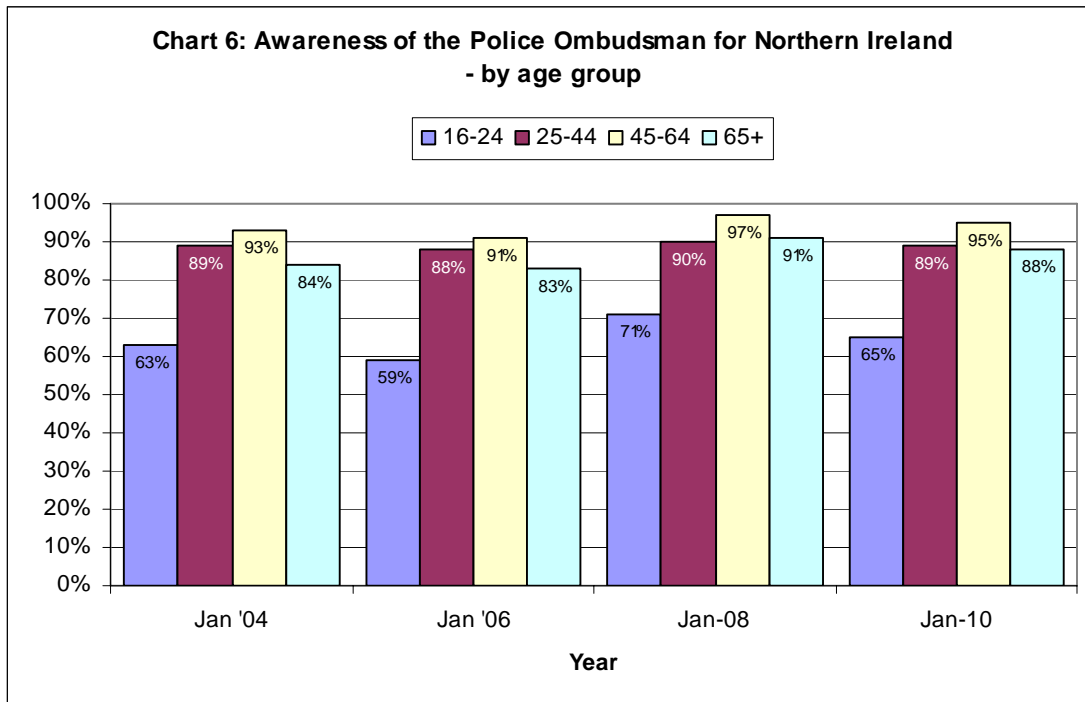
Despite only 17% of respondents saying that they would initially go to the Police Ombudsman to make a complaint against the police, 88% of respondents stated that they had heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. This proportion has not changed from the awareness level reported in 2009. Chart 5 shows that awareness levels have been consistently high since February 2002.



Similar proportions of men (89%) and women (87%) had heard of the Police

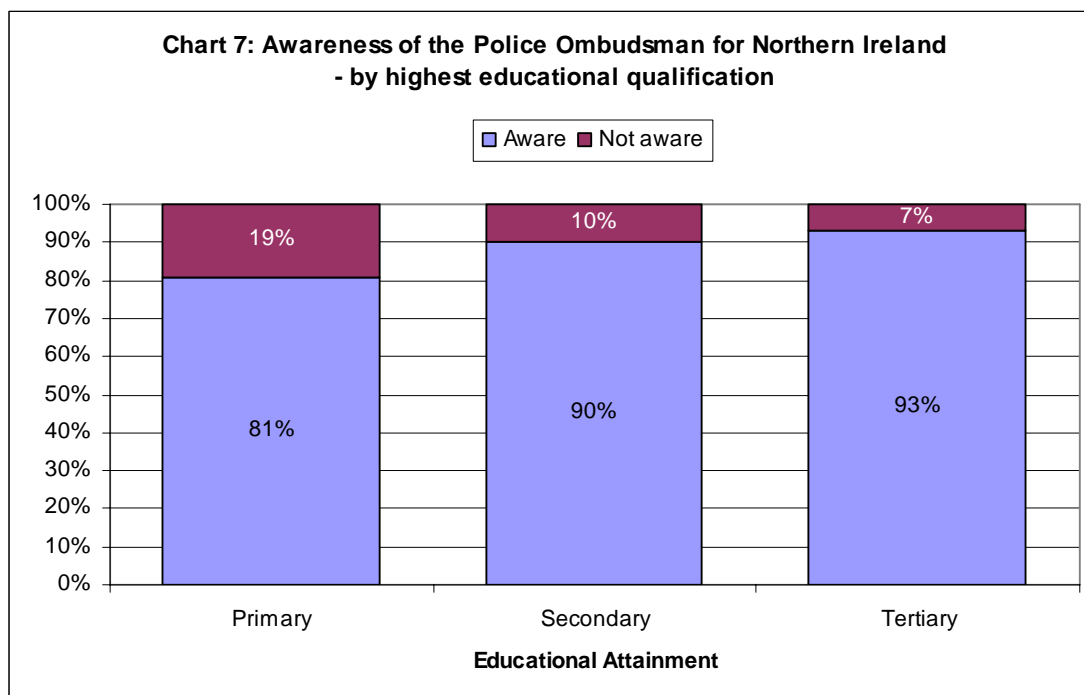
Ombudsman, compared with 2009 when a greater proportion of men (92%) were aware of the Police Ombudsman compared with women (84%).

Awareness of the Police Ombudsman was greater amongst Protestants than Catholics (91% compared to 87%) in 2010. This is consistent with findings reported in 2009 (93% of Protestants were aware of the Police Ombudsman compared with 84% of Catholics).



Respondents aged under 25 continue to exhibit lower levels of awareness, with 65% stating they had heard of the Police Ombudsman (Chart 6).

Awareness of the Police Ombudsman also varied according to the respondents' level of educational attainment, with higher levels of educational attainment being associated with higher levels of awareness (Chart 7).



When asked how they had heard about the Police Ombudsman, almost nine out of ten respondents (86%) cited television. This echoed previous findings on the source of people’s awareness, with other media appearing at similar levels to previous surveys.

**Table 4: Source of knowledge of the Police Ombudsman**

Source of information	% respondents by year			
	Jan 04	Jan 06	Jan 08	Jan 10
Television	93	90	93	86
Newspaper / Magazine	56	49	50	49
Radio	44	40	42	40
Word of mouth	13	12	12	11
Through work	7	7	7	7
Friends / Family	9	7	7	5
Leaflet	6	7	4	5
Internet	1	3	3	3
Poster	4	3	4	2
Attended presentation	1	1	1	1
Other	1	2	1	1

(Note: Percentages add to more than 100 as respondents could give more than one response)

All those respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman were asked for their opinion on whether or not the Police Ombudsman was independent of the police or part of the police. The majority of these respondents (80%) felt that the Police Ombudsman was independent of the police, with 17% believing that he was part of the police. Over the last two years, there has been a decrease in the proportion of respondents who believe the Police Ombudsman is independent of the police, from 86% in 2008 to 80% in 2010 (Chart 8).

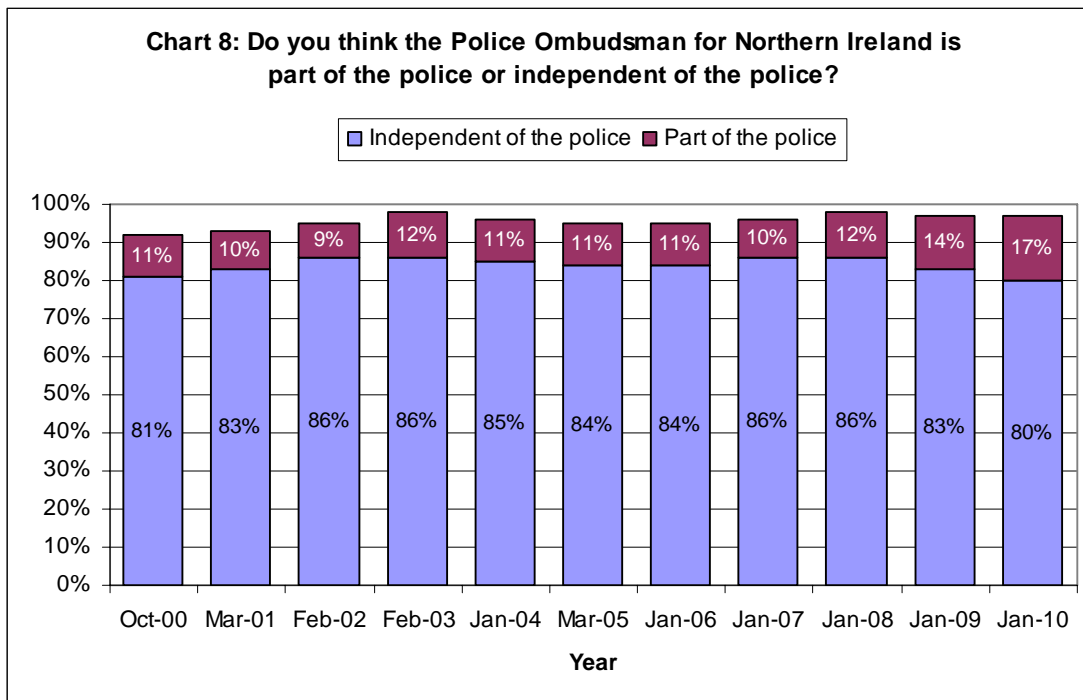
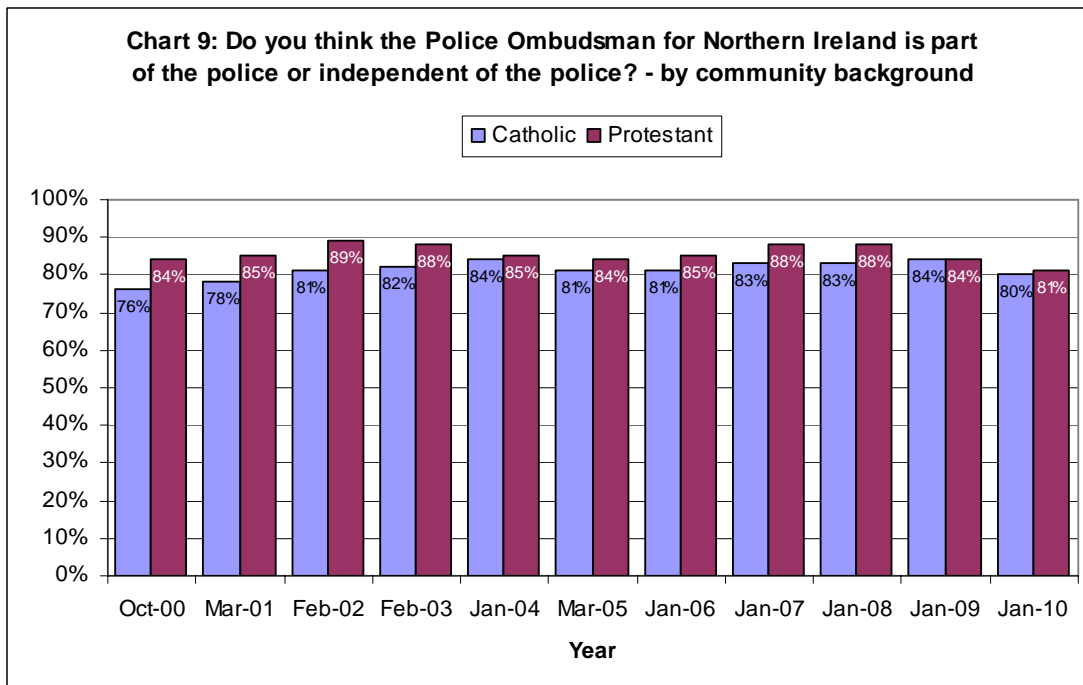


Chart 9 shows the differences in awareness of the independence of the Police Ombudsman between Catholics and Protestants. The current survey shows that awareness of the Office's independence was similar among Catholics and Protestants in 2010.



Respondents under 25 showed a lower level of awareness (59%) of the Police Ombudsman's independence of the police, than other age groups.

**Table 5: Awareness of the independence of the Police Ombudsman by age group**

Independence of the Police Ombudsman	% respondents by age group			
	16 – 24	25 – 44	45 – 64	65+
Part of the police	40	13	15	17
Independent of the police	59	86	84	80
Don't know	1	1	1	2

Respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman were asked where they would go to find contact details for the Office, if they needed to make contact. Forty per cent of respondents stated that they would use the internet, whilst 38% would use the telephone directory and 17% would go to a police station (Table 6).

**Table 6: Source of information for contacting the Police Ombudsman's Office**

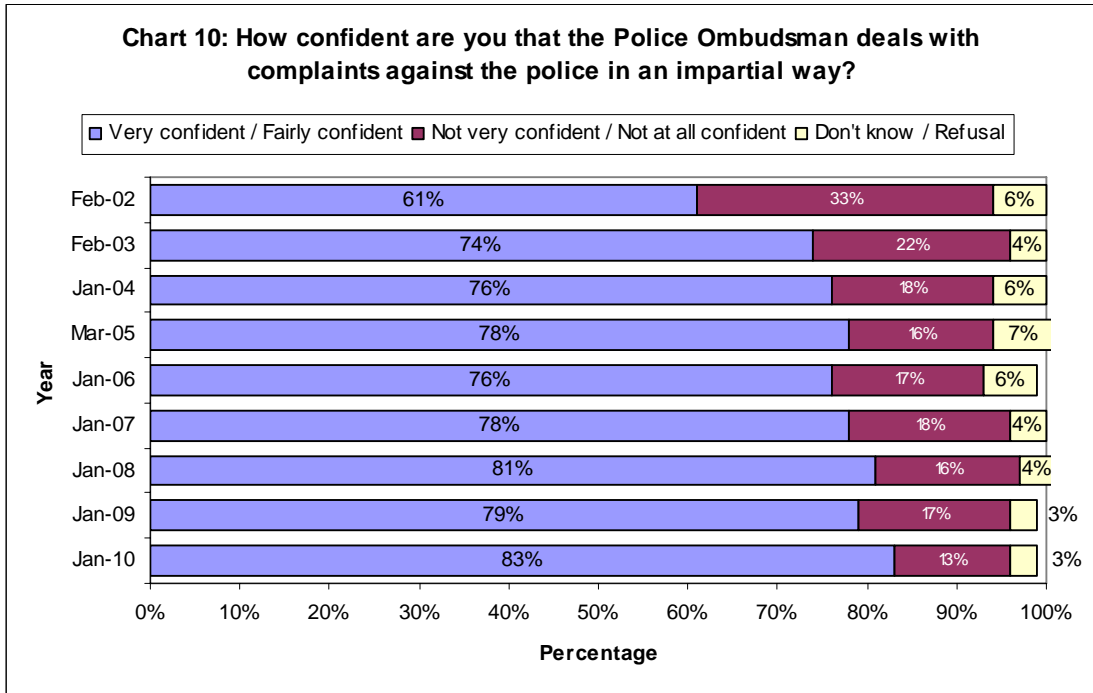
Where one would go to find contact details for the Police Ombudsman	% respondents
Internet	40
Telephone directory	38
Police station	17
Directory enquiries	8
Political representative	6
Legal representative	4
Advice agency	4
Call at office	4
Community association	1
Don't know	4
Other	1

(Percentages add to more than 100 as respondents could give more than one response)

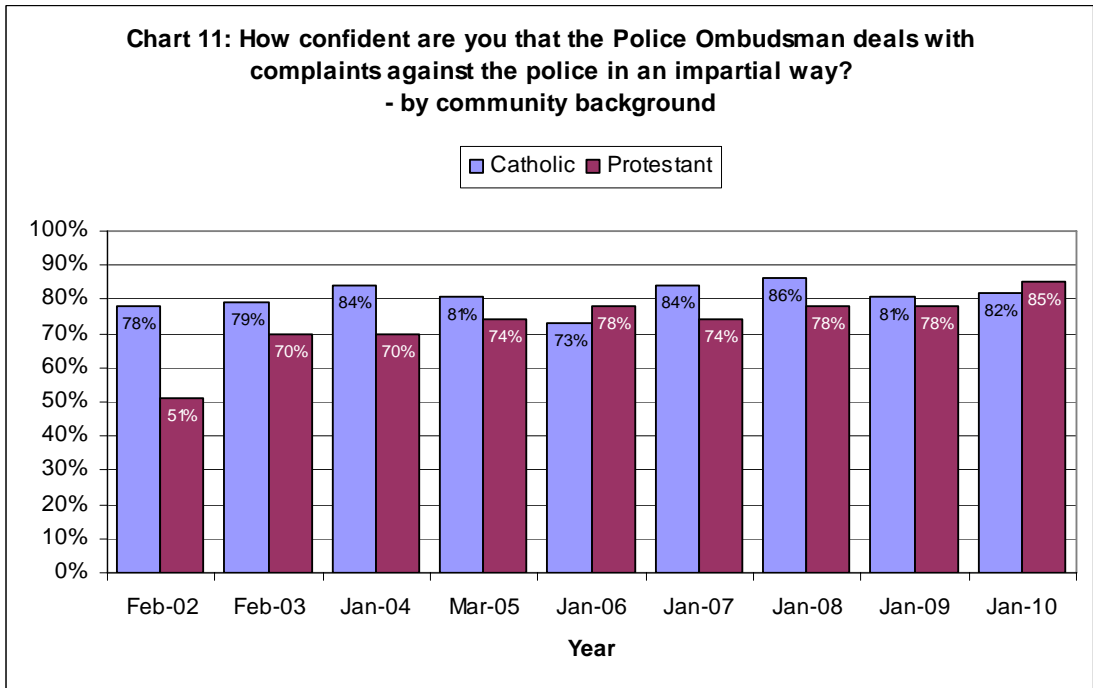
## Impartiality of investigation

Eighty three per cent of those respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman were fairly confident or very confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints in an impartial way. Thirteen per cent were not very confident or not at all confident of the Police Ombudsman's impartiality in investigations. Chart 10 shows that confidence in the impartiality of the Police Ombudsman has increased markedly since February 2002 (61%), but that the trend has also slowed down significantly.



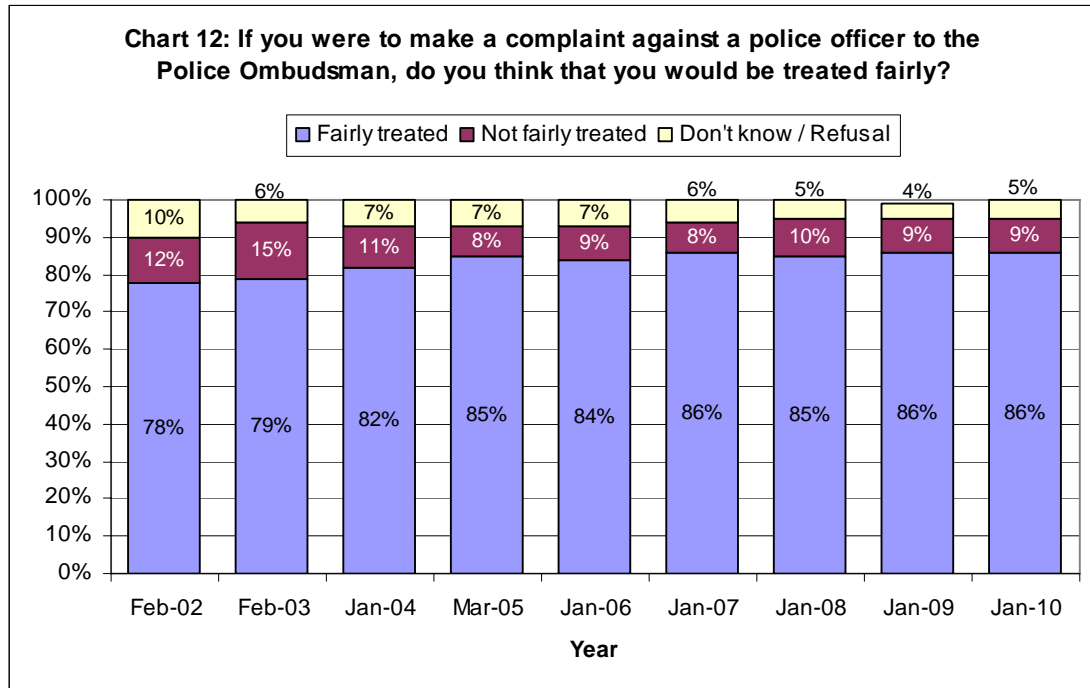


The proportion of Protestants who believe that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints in an impartial manner has risen from 51% in 2002 to 85% in 2010. Chart 11 shows that in previous years (except for 2006), confidence in the impartiality of the Police Ombudsman was higher among Catholics than Protestants. The current survey shows that there is little difference in the proportions of Catholic respondents and Protestant respondents who are confident that investigations are dealt with in an impartial manner.

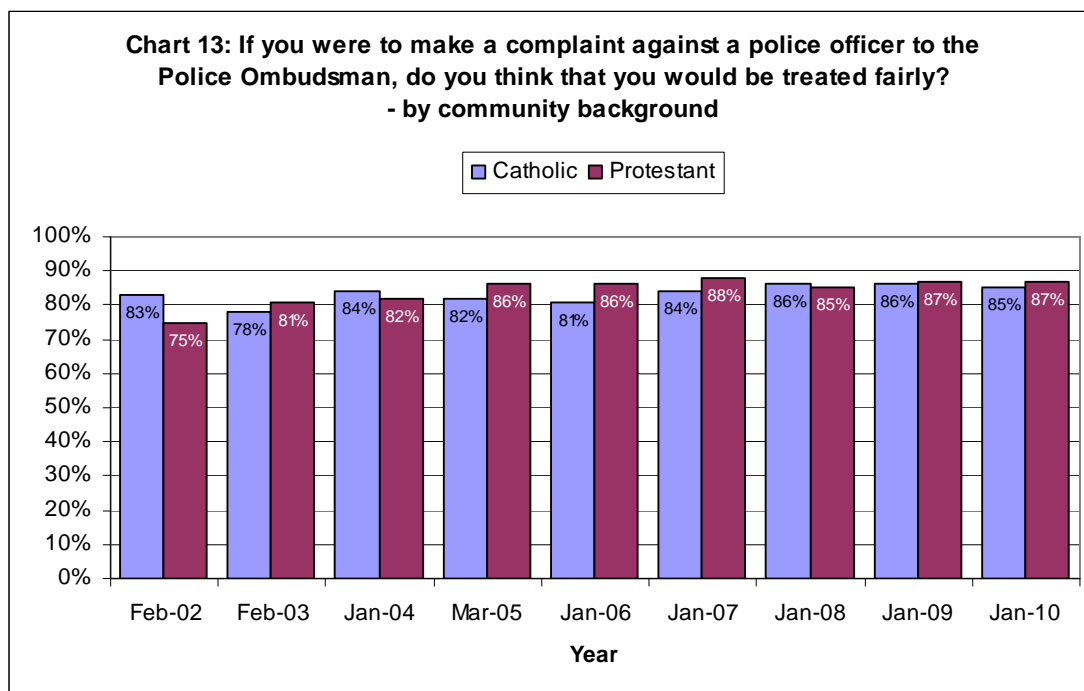


## Fairness and equality of treatment of complainant and police officers

Respondents were asked how they felt complainants and police officers would be treated by the Police Ombudsman in the event of a complaint being made. Eighty six per cent of respondents stated that they thought that they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint against a police officer (Chart 12). This figure has increased steadily between 2002 and 2010.



Further analysis of responses to this question shows that similar proportions of Catholics and Protestants were likely to think they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint (85% of Catholics compared to 87% of Protestants thought they would be treated fairly) (Chart 13).



Ninety per cent of respondents thought police officers would be treated fairly by the Police Ombudsman in the event of a complaint being made against them. Similar proportions of Catholics and Protestants believed that police officers would be treated fairly (92% and 89% respectively).

Those respondents who felt that either the complainant or the police officer would not be treated fairly by the Police Ombudsman, were subsequently asked who they felt would be treated better; the complainant or the police officer.

Twenty four per cent of these respondents believed that the complainant would be treated better, while 68% felt that the police officer would be treated better.

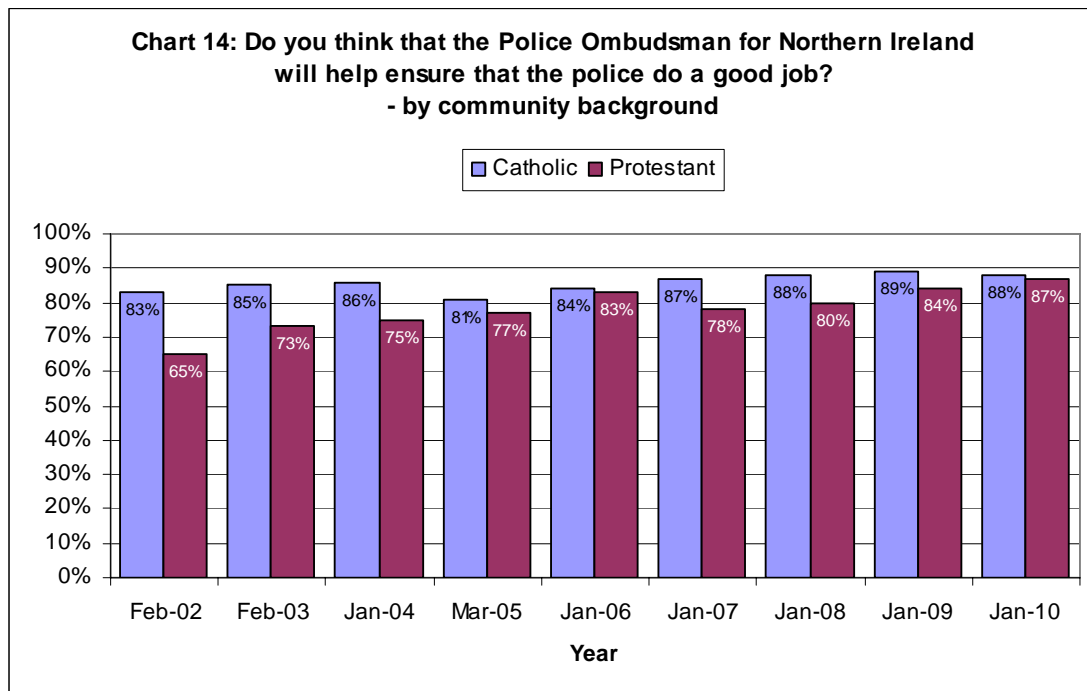
## Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing

Finally respondents were asked whether they thought the Police Ombudsman would contribute to effective policing in Northern Ireland and what aspects of policing would be improved due to the impact of the Police Ombudsman.

Eighty seven per cent of respondents felt that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police in Northern Ireland do a good job (86% in 2009), and 9% said that the Police Ombudsman would not help policing in Northern Ireland.

The proportion of Protestant respondents who believed that the Police Ombudsman will help ensure that the police do a good job has steadily increased since February 2002 to reach a similar level as Catholic respondents in January 2006 (Chart 14). During the three year period from 2007 to 2009, confidence among Protestants was lower than among Catholic

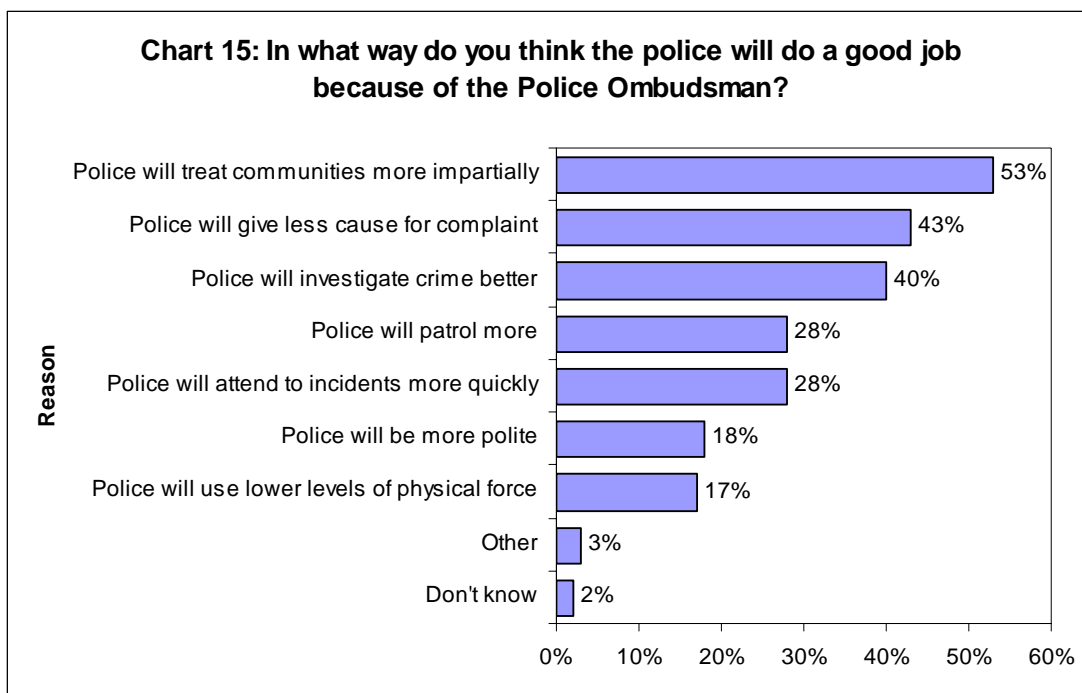
respondents. However in 2010, a similar level of Catholics (88%) and Protestants (87%) thought the Police Ombudsman would help the police do a good job.



Those respondents, who stated that they thought that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police do a good job, were asked in what way they felt the police would do a better job. The three main reasons quoted were:

- the police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially (53%);
- the police will give less cause for complaints from the public (43%); and
- the police will investigate crime better (40%).

A full breakdown of the responses given is illustrated in Chart 15.



Both Catholic (59%) and Protestant (49%) communities believed the main contribution to policing from the Police Ombudsman was that the police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially.

**Table 7: In what way will the police do a good job because of the Police Ombudsman? -By Community Background**

Ways police will do a good job	% respondents	
	Catholic	Protestant
Police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially	59	49
The police will give less cause for complaints from the public	42	44
The police will investigate crime better	42	37
The police will patrol more	23	31
The police will attend to incidents more quickly	27	29
The police will be more polite	17	20
The police will use less physical force	21	15
Other	3	3
Don't know	2	2

(Note: Percentages add to more than 100 as respondents could give more than one response)

# Appendix 1: Survey questions

## **1. Has a police officer ever behaved towards you in a way that you thought was unacceptable?**

- Yes – once or twice
- Yes – more than once or twice
- No
- Don't know/refused/no answer

## **2a. (If yes at 1) Thinking about the most recent incident, what did the police officer do that you thought was unacceptable?**

- The officer was violent towards you (for example, pushed or struck you)
- The officer was disrespectful or impolite to you
- The officer swore at you
- The officer used sectarian, racist or sexist language when dealing with you
- The officer didn't do his/her duty properly (for example, by not investigating the crime properly or not responding to a call)
- The officer harassed you
- The officer didn't follow proper procedures
- The officer stopped or searched you without reason
- The officer searched your house without reason
- The officer said you had done something you hadn't
- The officer took an item of your property
- The officer discriminated against you (for example, because of your race, gender, age or religion)
- Other (please specify)
- Don't know/refused/no answer

## **2b. Could you explain what happened?**

## **3. (If yes at 1) Thinking again about the most recent incident, did you make a complaint about this?**

- Yes
- No
- Don't know/refused/no answer

## **4. (If no at 3) What was the main reason you didn't make a complaint about this?**

- Felt it would not be taken seriously
- Felt nothing would be done about it
- Incident was not serious enough
- Couldn't be bothered
- Scared of police reprisals

Didn't want to make trouble for the police  
Forgot  
Didn't know how to complain about police behaviour  
Other (please specify)  
Don't know/refused/no answer

**5. If you wanted to make a complaint against the police, where would you go first of all? (code one only)**

Local police station  
Solicitor  
The Police Ombudsman  
The Chief Constable of the PSNI  
Your MP/MLA  
A local politician (for example, councillor)  
The Citizen's Advice Bureau  
The Policing Board  
Wouldn't make a complaint  
Other (please specify)  
Don't know/refused/no answer

**6. And how would you prefer to make your complaint?**

Completing an online form  
By e-mail  
By letter  
Face-to-face  
By telephone  
None of these

**7. Have you heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland?**

Yes  
No  
Don't know/refused/no answer

**8. (If yes at 7) How did you hear of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland? (code all that apply)**

Television  
Radio  
Newspaper/Magazine  
Through work  
Word of mouth  
Friends/Family  
Internet  
Leaflets  
Posters  
Attended a presentation about the Police Ombudsman

Other (please specify)  
Don't know/refused/no answer

**9. (If yes at 7) Do you think the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland is part of the police or independent of the police?**

Part of the police  
Independent of the police  
Don't know/refused/no answer

**10. (If yes at 7) How confident are you that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints against the police in an impartial way?**

Very confident  
Fairly confident  
Not very confident  
Not at all confident  
Don't know/refused/no answer

**11. (If yes at 7) If you needed to contact the Office of the Police Ombudsman where would you go to find the relevant contact details?**

Telephone directory  
Internet  
Call personally at the Office of the Police Ombudsman  
Directory enquiries  
Advice agency  
Political representative  
Legal representative  
Police station  
Community association  
Other

**12. (If yes at 7) If you were to make a complaint against a police officer to the Police Ombudsman, do you think that you would be treated fairly?**

Yes  
No  
Don't know/refused/no answer

**13. (If yes at 7) If you made a complaint against a police officer, do you think the police officer would be treated fairly?**

Yes  
No  
Don't know/refused/no answer

**14. (If no at 12 or 13) Do you think the Police Ombudsman treats the person making the complaint better or the police officer being**



**complained about better?**

- Treats the person making the complaint much better
- Treats the person making the complaint slightly better
- Treats the police officer being complained about slightly better
- Treats the police officer being complained about much better
- Don't know/refused/no answer

**15. (If yes at 7) Do you think the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland will help ensure that the police do a good job?**

- Yes
- No
- Don't know/refused/no answer

**16. (If yes at 15) In what way do you think the police will do a good job because of the Police Ombudsman?**

- The police will be more polite
- The police will attend to incidents more quickly
- The police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially
- The police will investigate crime better
- The police will use less physical force
- The police will patrol more
- The police will give less cause for complaints from the public
- Other (please specify)
- Don't know/refused/no answer

**Additional copies of this and other publications are available from:**

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**Textphone:** 028 9082 8759

**email:** [research@policeombudsman.org](mailto:research@policeombudsman.org)

These publications and other information about the work of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland are also available on the Internet at:

Website: [www.policeombudsman.org](http://www.policeombudsman.org)



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